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## The first Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *Calidris acuminata* for Madagascar

*Richard Patient*

L'auteur rapporte l'observation d'un Bécasseau à queue pointue *Calidris acuminata* à Toliara, dans le sud-ouest de Madagascar, le 10 novembre 1999. Il s'agit de la première mention pour le pays. L'espèce niche dans le nord-est de la Sibérie et hiverne au sud de l'équateur dans les îles du Pacifique occidental, en Australie et en Nouvelle Zélande. Des occasionnels ont été signalés aux Seychelles, mais pas en Afrique continentale.

On the afternoon of 10 November 1999 I was birdwatching with Cliff Waller and others at lagoons near Toliara airport, south-west Madagascar. The vast majority of waders present were Curlew Sandpipers *Calidris ferruginea*, of which there were at least 800. These were all in winter plumage, presenting a remarkably uniform, plain grey appearance. When I found a scaly brown wader among them, I was immediately intrigued. Although initially observed from the rear, size, structure and plumage features swiftly eliminated Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* and I knew it was either a Pectoral Sandpiper *C. melanotos* or a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *C. acuminata*. I have extensive field experience of the former from the UK and the Americas, but not of the latter, although I was aware of its features, the species being a very rare vagrant to the UK. As the bird exhibited a number of characters I would not associate with Pectoral Sandpiper (see below), I felt it had to be a Sharp-tailed, a view reinforced when it revealed its lack of a pectoral band. CW, who has extensive field experience of this species, unequivocally proclaimed it to be a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. We studied the bird through 20–60 x 80 telescopes for the next 20 minutes at ranges down to 70 m and made the following notes.

### Description

Medium-sized sandpiper, slightly larger and more pot-bellied than accompanying Curlew Sandpipers, with primaries not projecting beyond tail. Similar to Pectoral Sandpiper, but looking more 'lanky-legged'. Head appeared relatively small and flat crowned, with a neat chestnut cap streaked darker and contrasting with a bold whitish supercilium, which clearly extended behind the eye. Upperparts largely brown; feathers with white fringes contrasting with darker centres, creating a distinctly scaly appearance. Throat white. Breast washed pale peach, lacking

obvious dark markings except for a few brown streaks at the sides. Rest of underparts white. Bill relatively short and slightly decurved, tipped dark brown with paler, pinkish base at least to lower mandible. Legs yellowish olive. In flight, showed a narrow white wingbar. Rump and uppertail pattern typically calidrid, with blackish central band separating white sides. No call heard.

### Identification

Identified as Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and differentiated from Pectoral Sandpiper by the combination of chestnut cap, conspicuous broad supercilium clearly extending behind the eye, lack of clear-cut band of streaks across the breast (streaks restricted to sides), peach wash to the breast and subtle differences in shape (longer legged, pot-bellied and smaller headed)<sup>1,2</sup>. The white upperparts fringing combined with the peach breast coloration suggest it was a first-year moulting into winter plumage.

### Status and distribution

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper breeds in north-eastern Siberia, leaving its breeding grounds in July–September to winter south of the equator on islands in the western Pacific and in Australia and New Zealand<sup>1,3</sup>. Vagrants have been reported from Seychelles (October–February and July)<sup>5</sup>, but not from mainland Africa<sup>6</sup>. It is not included in the most recent work on the birds of Madagascar<sup>4</sup> and this record appears to be the first for the island.

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## Little Rush Warbler *Bradypterus baboecala*, new to Togo

Gavin Selfe

L'auteur rapporte la découverte de la Bouscarle caquetteuse *Bradypterus baboecala* c10 km au nord de Lomé, Togo, le 9 juin 2002. Ceci constitue la première mention pour le pays et également la plus occidentale en Afrique de l'Ouest, l'espèce n'ayant été observée auparavant que jusqu'à Onitsha, au Nigéria. L'oiseau a été vu et son chant entendu à plusieurs reprises, la dernière fois le 28 juillet.

On 9 June 2002, at c09.30 hrs, I observed a Little Rush Warbler *Bradypterus baboecala* in a large swamp c10 km north of Lomé, Togo (c06°13'N 01°16'E). The bird was uttering its characteristic song, consisting of an initially slow, then accelerating series of dry *truk... truk truk...* notes stopping abruptly, while displaying low above the vegetation with spread tail pointing down. I watched it for c30 minutes under good light conditions (sunny weather with some clouds), approaching it to c10 m, and obtained good views while it perched low on reed stems, noticing in particular its whitish underparts with streaked chest and strongly graduated, faintly and narrowly barred tail. The site consists of a large swampy area along the Zio River, just before it reaches Lake Togo. The swamp has some islands of slightly higher, solid ground with several large trees. During subsequent visits to the site, I heard the species several more times, the last during my final visit in the morning of 28 July 2002. I know the song well from southern Africa.

This appears to be the first record of Little Rush Warbler in Togo; it is not mentioned in the most recent checklist for the country<sup>2</sup>. Although the species, which is also known under the alternative name of African Sedge Warbler, is widespread and locally common in eastern and southern Africa, it is a rare and local resident in western Africa, where it has only been recorded with certainty from scattered localities west to Onitsha in Nigeria<sup>1,3,4</sup>. This record is therefore the westernmost to date, although there is a single, unconfirmed, claim of a singing bird from northern Côte d'Ivoire<sup>5</sup>. Little Rush Warbler may perhaps be more widespread than these scarce records suggest. Its secretive behaviour may cause it to be overlooked, although its distinctive, loud song, which is mainly uttered in the breeding season, during the rains, attracts attention<sup>4</sup>.

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